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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning is a process deliberately designed to help educational leaders conceive of the kinds of institutions that they would like to create to serve their students. Drawn from industry, strategic planning attempts to respond to a wide variety of factors determining the directions that schools should take in planning for the future. Curriculum planning must be a continual process if programs are to remain responsive to changes in society, to the characteristics of learners, and to the most recent knowledge in vital fields. Strategic planning affords a context for increasing the probability of answering each of these needs. The strategic planning process involves (1) analyzing social, economic, demographic, and political forces affecting the schools; (2) identifying needs or weaknesses of the schools' current programs; (3) diagnosing the current health of the school organization; (4) establishing a mission statement; and (5) creating action plans to achieve the established goals. The action plans could involve changing the school organization, developing a curriculum to prepare students for the future, improving teaching, or deciding on steps to take to increase the use of educational technology. To be successful, the strategic planning process must involve educators throughout the system as deeply as possible, and must be designed to obtain widespread support. (PGD)

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Strategic Planning for Curriculum Reform

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Strategic Planning for Curriculum Reform

The "reform" of American education has been debated in various quarters for over two decades with little agreement on just what needs to be "reformed" much less whether or not any progress is being made. Further, our leaders disagree on whether political, empirical, or social processes are the best route to take.

It does seem clear that the curriculum of schools has received perhaps the least attention, particularly the issue of the content of the various academic fields. The preoccupation with improving teaching is essential if one considers the millions of students for whom daily classes are not exactly a series of hairbreadth escapes. In the meantime, faculties rarely deal in a substantive manner with the time-honored question of "What knowledge is of most worth?"

Whatever your view is on the matter of the need for reforming education, these facts are clear:

- The United States graduates about three-quarters of the age group, but among some low-income students, only a third receive diplomas.
- Student achievement scores in basic skills have shown little progress in composition, reading, and mathematics over the past two decades. Recent data on composition skills show about one-fourth of students able to express themselves "adequately" on specified writing tasks.
- Large numbers of students do graduate but with minimal levels of attainment in basic skills and no vocational training that will help them get a job.
- Even college-bound students often have skimpy knowledge of basic concepts in such fields as geography, history, science, or literature.

- Both employers and college teachers report students are lacking in such skills as critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.

The extent to which these weaknesses tend to characterize graduates of the nation's schools has been documented elsewhere. It is also true that significant numbers of today's graduates are better educated than ever before.

The political approaches to reforming education, which are being taken by many governors and state boards of education, dominate today's scene. Their principal concerns have been to increase testing for students (perhaps the best example of what Arthur Wise has called "hyperrationalization"--if one tests more, students will achieve better), competency testing of teachers, career ladders and merit pay for teachers, increasing graduation requirements in academic subjects, and "management" training for principals so they will be better instructional leaders.

Only rarely have the states attempted to mandate curriculum content to be taught by local districts, but some have strongly suggested what this content ought to be. This is usually ignored by local school districts, and state departments of education appear to be backing off from this approach.

The Nature of Strategic Planning

It can be contended that this plethora of state mandates has reduced local initiative for school improvement. Just as the greatly expanded federal role led to receptivity of the "Reagan revolution," many local school administrators literally threw up their hands at the annual barrage of new mandates that were rarely sufficiently funded to be accomplished. At times

such administrators found themselves diverting resources from existing programs to give to the most recent mandate.

At the same time one can ask the question of where does the motivation come for school improvement in a public enterprise that lacks competition in most communities? The answer surely has to reside in the professional competence and initiative of the local staff working in concert with a board of education that tries to address the community's concern for good schools. In recent years, a number of school districts have drawn from industry to develop a process called strategic planning which attempts to respond to a wide variety of factors determining the direction schools ought to take in planning for the future.

Schools have long engaged in a variety of planning processes and have often been required to do so by the state department of education. Strategic planning is something akin to futures planning but hardly as a "crystal ball" exercise, as Kanter (1983) has noted in describing the corporate process in The Change Masters:

> While "strategic" is clearly an overused word, and many companies are dropping it as an automatic modifier to "planning," it does express an important idea for this part of the change process: deliberate and conscious articulation of a direction. Strong leaders articulate direction and save the organization from change via "drift." They create a vision of a possible future that allows themselves and others to see more clearly the steps to take, building on present capacities and strengths, on the results of Force A and Force B, to get there (p. 294).

The process can be very similar in either the private sector or in public institutions, there are many different models depicting the processes to be followed, and all are very rational. The model employed for planning at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and in working with networks of local schools since 1983, is shown in Figure 1. The first network consisted of teams from 25 high schools from across the United States, Canada, and Europe, who spent two years engaging their faculties and communities in the strategic planning process.

The mission of this network was to help each high school develop a plan for the future in the areas of school organization, curriculum, improving teaching, and use of educational technology.

Details of the Process

Environmental Scanning Also called the external analysis, this requires analysis of various social, economic, demographic, and political forces and their consequences for the schools. Most schools organized themselves into study groups or task forces to examine, for example, the impact of the following social trends[1] are having on the school's program:

1. Increasing numbers of senior citizens
2. Changing family patterns
3. Increasing numbers of minority students
4. Shift from agricultural/industrial economy to information/service economy
5. Expanding role for technology in people's lives
6. Increasing interdependence among the planet's civilizations

In each school these and other trends were examined to determine the extent

to which they were already having an impact, or could be expected to have consequences in the future, on some aspect of the child's experience in the school.

Internal Analysis This phase involves giving a priority rating to existing needs or weaknesses in the school program. Issues dealing with poor achievement, dropouts, or other current concerns are set as needing attention. In order for strategic plans to survive, they must incorporate both "here and now" issues and those more concerned with the future.

Internal Analysis of the Organization Here attention is placed on diagnosing the current health of the organization. Such issues as low morale, lack of teamwork and cooperation, and nonresponsiveness to weaknesses are considered. Such strengths and weaknesses are noted and held for incorporation into the final plan.

It is important to recognize that up until this stage the process is largely analysis of data, much group deliberation, and setting of priorities. Many participants get worn down in this process before they ever get to the creative stages of setting a mission and developing creative solutions to the conditions they have identified.

Establish Mission Statement Here a local faculty must attempt to assert what a particular school wants to excel at above all the things it does. For most universities such a statement would include something about research. For Mortimer Adler, schools would teach the great ideas of men and women down through the ages. If an elementary school incorporated something about citizenship being taken seriously along with teaching basic skills, they would have lots of options from which to choose in improving

this area. Similarly, if a secondary school set intellectual development in such areas as critical thinking or reasoning, the faculty would probably need training in appropriate teaching strategies. Developing the mission statement is difficult because it is perhaps the most creative stage of strategic planning. In the business world, it means knowing what your business really is and doing it well.

Creating Action Plans The final stage draws on the data collected, priorities set, and areas of consensus for designing what the faculty proposes to do new, differently, or better. In the ASCD networks, schools have been urged to:

1. Plan the kind of organization that will best serve the students in the years to come. How can morale and school climate be improved? What mechanisms or structures will be used to solve problems on a regular basis? Should differentiated or specialized roles for teachers be established? How can the principal serve as more of an instructional leader?
2. Design a curriculum of those common learnings believed to be most appropriate to the lives of students in the 21st century. Here the results of the environmental scanning process are brought to bear. One the the strengths of the strategic planning process is that it compels systematic attention to a large number of factors that could or should affect the school's program. It is at this stage that university scholars should be actively involved with the local faculty.
3. Set a plan for the improvement of teaching. Teachers have a variety of needs in the area of teaching strategies. Some will need attention to rudimentary matters such as classroom management skills in order to increase academic learning time while others need more help on the

principles of learning and motivating students. Most will benefit from good training in newer techniques to improve student thinking skills. Five years is a minimal period of time for all members of a staff to receive high quality training and be afforded help with coaching and feedback - important ingredients of good staff development.

4. Decide next steps for increasing use of educational technology. The adoption rate for technology in schools is slow for a variety of reasons, but most institutions can probably make better use of computers, video materials, and satellite-transmitted information techniques. Teachers need to have the backing of administrators, access to information on what is available, and time to determine appropriate next steps.

The planning format can be simple or sophisticated, a Gantt Chart or a more detailed events calendar. What is important is that the faculty, board of education, and community understand why such changes are needed, and that a reasonable degree of commitment exists to stay with the plan. The total time required to do strategic planning can vary from a few months to two years...the important thing is that the research and analysis stage not be dragged out too long at the expense of the more creative final stages.

Conclusion and Caveats

There is nothing new about rational planning. Strategic planning is new in that it is a process deliberately designed to help leaders conceive of the kind of institution they would like to create to serve their students. People don't just naturally engage in such thinking on a regular basis except in rare instances. The need for such thinking is compelled by the remarkable rate of changes witnessed in the twentieth century. Recent

studies of the most successful businesses in the corporate world carry a simple message...the "blue chippers" have a remarkable capacity to respond quickly to changes in the marketplace. Schools will always be slower because they must educate their parents as they change, but change they must or they will become an increasingly insignificant influence in the lives of their students.

The probability of nothing coming of strategic planning in schools is high since they are busy places every day of the year. The probability of success is higher if the board of education and superintendent and other leaders give the process their full support and afford teachers the time to participate authentically. Teachers quite rightly have an inherent skepticism of such planning since little has come out of such exercises in the past. The leaders of the planning process should set out at the beginning to overcome this attitude by giving full responsibility to as many participants as possible.

Curriculum planning must be a continual process if the program is to remain fine tuned and responsive to changes in society, the learner, and the most recent scholarship in the various fields. Strategic planning affords a context for increasing the probability of a systematic approach to responding to each of these three key elements.

Sources

Kanter, Rosebeth Moss, The Change Masters--Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the American Corporation, (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1983), pp. 294-295.

1. For a more complete listing of prominent social trends and other information on the strategic planning process used in the ASCD networks see: Update (Volume 28, Number 4, June 1986).

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